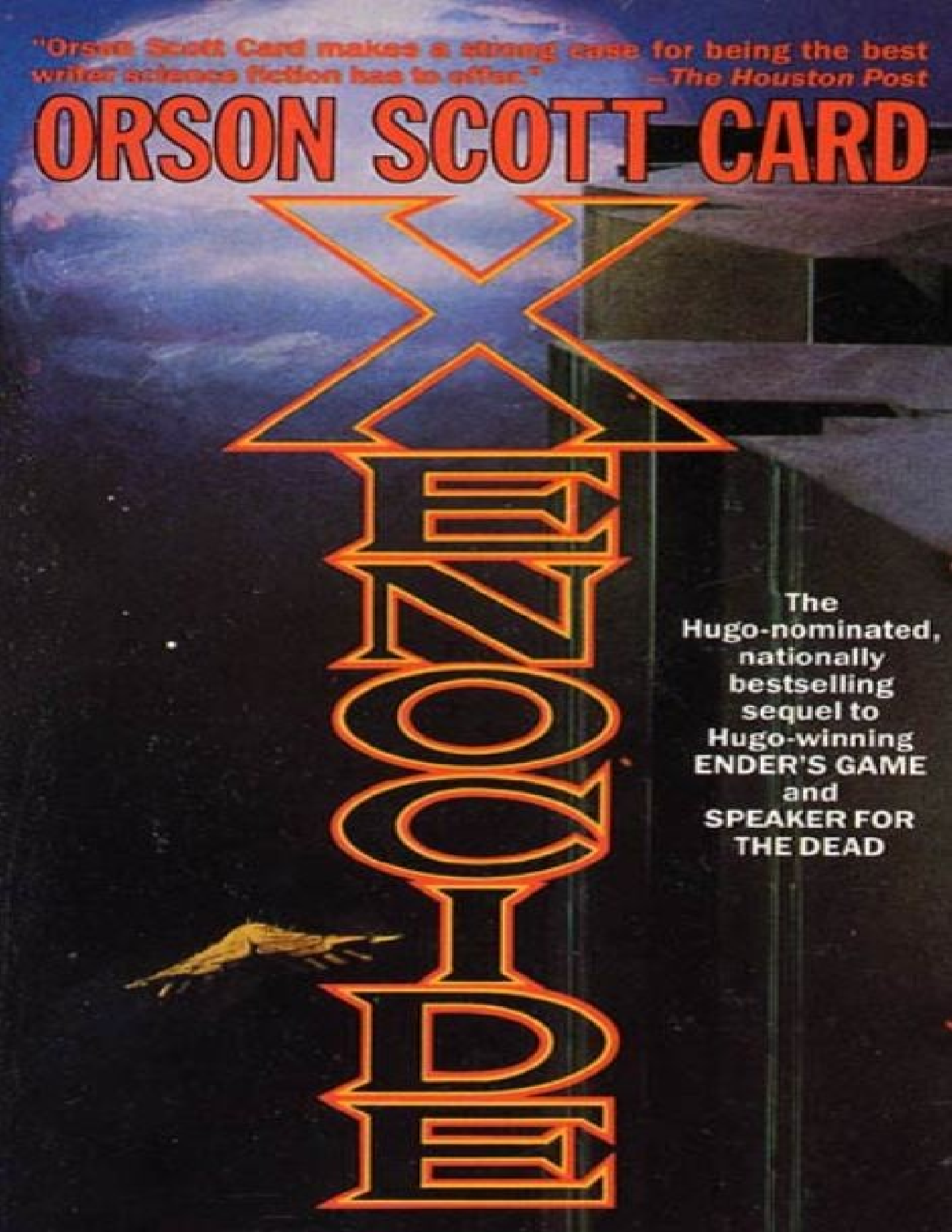
"Orson Scott Card makes a strong case for being the best writer science fiction has to offer." —*The Houston Post*

ORSON SCOTT CARD



XENOCIDE

The Hugo-nominated, nationally bestselling sequel to Hugo-winning ENDER'S GAME and SPEAKER FOR THE DEAD

XENOCIDE

Orson Scott Card

A TOM DOHERTY
ASSOCIATES BOOK
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To Clark and Kathy Kidd:
for the freedom, for the haven,
and for frolics all over America.

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A PARTING

<Today one of the brothers asked me: Is it a terrible prison, not to be able to move from the place where you're standing?>

<You answered …>

<I told him that I am now more free than he is. The inability to move frees me from the obligation to act.>

<You who speak languages, you are such liars.>

Han Fei-tzu sat in lotus position on the bare wooden floor beside his wife's sickbed. Until a moment ago he might have been sleeping; he wasn't sure. But now he was aware of the slight change in her breathing, a change as subtle as the wind from a butterfly's passing.

Jiang-qing, for her part, must also have detected some change in him, for she had not spoken before and now she did speak. Her voice was very soft. But Han Fei-tzu could hear her clearly, for the house was silent. He had asked his friends and servants for stillness during the dusk of Jiang-qing's life. Time enough for careless noise during the long night that was to come, when there would be no hushed words from her lips.

"Still not dead," she said. She had greeted him with these words each time she woke during the past few days. At first the words had seemed whimsical or ironic to him, but now he knew that she spoke with disappointment. She longed for death now, not because she hadn't loved life, but because death was now unavoidable, and what cannot be shunned must be embraced. That was the Path. Jiang-qing had never taken a step away from the Path in her life.

"Then the gods are kind to me," said Han Fei-tzu.

"To you," she breathed. "What do we contemplate?"

It was her way of asking him to share his private thoughts with her. When others asked his private thoughts, he felt spied upon. But Jiang-qing asked only so that she could also think the same thought; it was part of their having become a single soul.

"We are contemplating the nature of desire," said Han Fei-tzu.

"Whose desire?" she asked. "And for what?"

My desire for your bones to heal and become strong, so that they don't snap at the slightest pressure. So that you could stand again, or even raise an arm without your own muscles tearing away chunks of bone or causing the bone to break under the tension. So that I wouldn't have to watch you wither away until now you weigh only eighteen kilograms. I never knew how perfectly happy we were until I learned that we could not stay together.

"*My* desire," he answered. "For you."

"'You only covet what you do not have.' Who said that?"

"You did," said Han Fei-tzu. "Some say, 'what you *cannot* have.' Others say, 'what you *should* not have.' I say, 'You can truly covet only what you will always hunger for.'"

"You have me forever."

"I will lose you tonight. Or tomorrow. Or next week."

"Let us contemplate the nature of desire," said Jiang-qing. As before, she was using philosophy to pull him out of his brooding melancholy.

He resisted her, but only playfully. "You are a harsh ruler," said Han Fei-tzu. "Like your ancestor-of-the-heart, you make no allowance for other people's frailty." Jiang-qing was named for a revolutionary leader of the ancient past, who had tried to lead the people onto a new Path but was overthrown by weak-hearted cowards. It was not right, thought Han Fei-tzu, for his wife to die before him: her ancestor-of-the-heart had outlived her husband. Besides, wives *should* live longer than husbands. Women were more complete inside themselves. They were also better at living in their children. They were never as solitary as a man alone.

Jiang-qing refused to let him return to brooding. "When a man's wife is dead, what does he long for?"

Rebelliously, Han Fei-tzu gave her the most false answer to her question. "To lie with her," he said.

"The desire of the body," said Jiang-qing.

Since she was determined to have this conversation, Han Fei-tzu took up the catalogue for her. "The desire of the body is to act. It includes all touches, casual and intimate, and all customary movements. Thus he sees a movement out of the corner of his eye, and thinks he has seen his dead wife moving across the

doorway, and he cannot be content until he has walked to the door and seen that it was not his wife. Thus he wakes up from a dream in which he heard her voice, and finds himself speaking his answer aloud as if she could hear him."

"What else?" asked Jiang-qing.

"I'm tired of philosophy," said Han Fei-tzu. "Maybe the Greeks found comfort in it, but not me."

"The desire of the spirit," said Jiang-qing, insisting.

"Because the spirit is of the earth, it is that part which makes new things out of old ones. The husband longs for all the unfinished things that he and his wife were making when she died, and all the unstarted dreams of what they would have made if she had lived. Thus a man grows angry at his children for being too much like him and not enough like his dead wife. Thus a man hates the house they lived in together, because either he does not change it, so that it is as dead as his wife, or because he *does* change it, so that it is no longer half of her making."

"You don't have to be angry at our little Qing-jao," said Jiang-qing.

"Why?" asked Han Fei-tzu. "Will you stay, then, and help me teach her to be a woman? All I can teach her is to be what *I* am—cold and hard, sharp and strong, like obsidian. If she grows like that, while she looks so much like you, how can I help but be angry?"

"Because you can teach her everything that I am, too," said Jiang-qing.

"If I had any part of you in me," said Han Fei-tzu, "I would not have needed to marry you to become a complete person." Now he teased her by using philosophy to turn the conversation away from pain. "That is the desire of the soul. Because the soul is made of light and dwells in air, it is that part which conceives and keeps ideas, especially the idea of the self. The husband longs for his whole self, which was made of the husband and wife together. Thus he never believes any of his own thoughts, because there is always a question in his mind to which his wife's thoughts were the only possible answer. Thus the whole world seems dead to him because he cannot trust anything to keep its meaning before the onslaught of this unanswerable question."

"Very deep," said Jiang-qing.

"If I were Japanese I would commit seppuku, spilling my bowel into the jar of your ashes."

"Very wet and messy," she said.

He smiled. "Then I should be an ancient Hindu, and burn myself on your pyre."

But she was through with joking. "Qing-jao," she whispered. She was reminding him he could do nothing so flamboyant as to die with her. There was

little Qing-jao to care for.

So Han Fei-tzu answered her seriously. “How can I teach her to be what you are?”

“All that is good in me,” said Jiang-qing, “comes from the Path. If you teach her to obey the gods, honor the ancestors, love the people, and serve the rulers, I will be in her as much as you are.”

“I would teach her the Path as part of myself,” said Han Fei-tzu.

“Not so,” said Jiang-qing. “The Path is not a natural part of you, my husband. Even with the gods speaking to you every day, you insist on believing in a world where everything can be explained by natural causes.”

“I obey the gods.” He thought, bitterly, that he had no choice; that even to delay obedience was torture.

“But you don’t *know* them. You don’t love their works.”

“The Path is to love the people. The gods we only obey.” How can I love gods who humiliate me and torment me at every opportunity?

“We love the people because they are creatures of the gods.”

“Don’t preach to me.”

She sighed.

Her sadness stung him like a spider. “I wish you would preach to me forever,” said Han Fei-tzu.

“You married me because you knew I loved the gods, and that love for them was completely missing from yourself. That was how I completed you.”

How could he argue with her, when he knew that even now he hated the gods for everything they had ever done to him, everything they had ever made him do, everything they had stolen from him in his life.

“Promise me,” said Jiang-qing.

He knew what these words meant. She felt death upon her; she was laying the burden of her life upon him. A burden he would gladly bear. It was losing her company on the Path that he had dreaded for so long.

“Promise that you will teach Qing-jao to love the gods and walk always on the Path. Promise that you will make her as much my daughter as yours.”

“Even if she never hears the voice of the gods?”

“The Path is for everyone, not just the godspoken.”

Perhaps, thought Han Fei-tzu, but it was much easier for the godspoken to follow the Path, because to them the price for straying from it was so terrible. The common people were free; they could leave the Path and not feel the pain of it for years. The godspoken couldn’t leave the Path for an hour.

“Promise me.”

I will. I promise.

But he couldn’t say the words out loud. He did not know why, but his reluctance was deep.

In the silence, as she waited for his vow, they heard the sound of running feet on the gravel outside the front door of the house. It could only be Qing-jao, home from the garden of Sun Cao-pi. Only Qing-jao was allowed to run and make noise during this time of hush. They waited, knowing that she would come straight to her mother’s room.

The door slid open almost noiselessly. Even Qing-jao had caught enough of the hush to walk softly when she was actually in the presence of her mother. Though she walked on tiptoe, she could hardly keep from dancing, almost galloping across the floor. But she did not fling her arms around her mother’s neck; she remembered that lesson even though the terrible bruise had faded from Jiang-qing’s face, where Qing-jao’s eager embrace had broken her jaw three months ago.

“I counted twenty-three white carp in the garden stream,” said Qing-jao.

“So many,” said Jiang-qing.

“I think they were showing themselves to me,” said Qing-jao. “So I could count them. None of them wanted to be left out.”

“Love you,” whispered Jiang-qing.

Han Fei-tzu heard a new sound in her breathy voice—a popping sound, like bubbles bursting with her words.

“Do you think that seeing so many carp means that I will be godspoken?” asked Qing-jao.

“I will ask the gods to speak to you,” said Jiang-qing.

Suddenly Jiang-qing’s breathing became quick and harsh. Han Fei-tzu immediately knelt and looked at his wife. Her eyes were wide and frightened. The moment had come.

Her lips moved. Promise me, she said, though her breath could make no sound but gasping.

“I promise,” said Han Fei-tzu.

Then her breathing stopped.

“What do the gods say when they talk to you?” asked Qing-jao.

“Your mother is very tired,” said Han Fei-tzu. “You should go out now.”

“But she didn’t answer me. What do the gods say?”

“They tell secrets,” said Han Fei-tzu. “No one who hears will repeat them.”

Qing-jao nodded wisely. She took a step back, as if to leave, but stopped. “May I kiss you, Mama?”

“Lightly on the cheek,” said Han Fei-tzu.

Qing-jao, being small for a four-year-old, did not have to bend very far at all to

kiss her mother's cheek. "I love you, Mama."

"You'd better leave now, Qing-jao," said Han Fei-tzu.

"But Mama didn't say she loved me too."

"She did. She said it before. Remember? But she's very tired and weak. Go now."

He put just enough sternness in his voice that Qing-jao left without further questions. Only when she was gone did Han Fei-tzu let himself feel anything but care for her. He knelt over Jiang-qing's body and tried to imagine what was happening to her now. Her soul had flown and was now already in heaven. Her spirit would linger much longer; perhaps her spirit would dwell in this house, if it had truly been a place of happiness for her. Superstitious people believed that all spirits of the dead were dangerous, and put up signs and wards to fend them off. But those who followed the Path knew that the spirit of a good person was never harmful or destructive, for their goodness in life had come from the spirit's love of making things. Jiang-qing's spirit would be a blessing in the house for many years to come, if she chose to stay.

Yet even as he tried to imagine her soul and spirit, according to the teachings of the Path, there was a cold place in his heart that was certain that all that was left of Jiang-qing was this brittle, dried-up body. Tonight it would burn as quickly as paper, and then she would be gone except for the memories in his heart.

Jiang-qing was right. Without her to complete his soul, he was already doubting the gods. And the gods had noticed—they always did. At once he felt the unbearable pressure to do the ritual of cleansing, until he was rid of his unworthy thoughts. Even now they could not leave him unpunished. Even now, with his wife lying dead before him, the gods insisted that he do obeisance to them before he could shed a single tear of grief for her.

At first he meant to delay, to put off obedience. He had schooled himself to be able to postpone the ritual for as long as a whole day, while hiding all outward signs of his inner torment. He could do that now—but only by keeping his heart utterly cold. There was no point in that. Proper grief could come only when he had satisfied the gods. So, kneeling there, he began the ritual.

He was still twisting and gyrating with the ritual when a servant peered in. Though the servant said nothing, Han Fei-tzu heard the faint sliding of the door and knew what the servant would assume: Jiang-qing was dead, and Han Fei-tzu was so righteous that he was communing with the gods even before he announced her death to the household. No doubt some would even suppose that the gods had come to take Jiang-qing, since she was known for her extraordinary holiness. No one would guess that even as Han Fei-tzu worshiped, his heart was